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ABSTRACT

To help in the exploration of developments in increasing learning flexibility in Great Britain's further education system, this paper suggests the development of learner flexibility profiles as devices for analyzing and recording the nature and extent of student choice or discretion. The introductory section reviews developments in open learning systems in Great Britain and current interest in learning situations which provide flexibility for students. The next section defines flexible learning as the creation of learning opportunities tailored to meet the needs of the learner and discusses the role of student choice and negotiation in flexible learning systems. The next sections focus on the methods of developing a profile of learner flexibility in terms of dimensions, such as the aims and content of learning, methods of assessment, modes of attendance, and pace of learning. Issues of measuring flexibility along curricular and administrative levels are discussed next, followed by an examination of the ways learner flexibility profiles can be used. Appendices provide examples of possible scalings against a range of dimensions; scales for the major dimensions of curriculum content, assessment, and learning methods; a breakdown of the learning methods dimension into lesson structure, learning resources, and tutorial support; and examples where central bodies allow flexibility but students are unable to take advantage of the full range of opportunities. (LAL)

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LEARNER FLEXIBILITY PROFILES

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LEARNER FLEXIBILITY PROFILESINTRODUCTION

1. The last decade has seen the development of a variety of open learning systems designed to provide the student with some degree of autonomy. Although the number of further education students in open learning systems is growing rapidly, actual numbers are small compared with those following conventional correspondence courses and very small indeed compared with those following formal courses. None of the systems so far developed in further education promises to approach in scale the higher education opportunities provided through the Open University.
2. The flexibility available to students through present open learning systems fall in general into two major categories. The first relates to "open access" arrangements. These are intended to provide entry to higher education for students for whom the 'two A-level' entry is not appropriate. Typical are those at North East London Polytechnic, the Open College of the North West and in several other areas. The second type of system, represented by FlexiStudy or the British Telecommunications schemes, provides enhancement of correspondence courses through tutorial and other support. To date, in UK, there have been few examples of the individualised, self-paced systems which occur frequently in North America and where the student attends the college whenever he wishes, usually without notice. There have been very few attempts to replicate or extend the arrangements demonstrated in the Bradford Mathematics Workshop, although there is now, for example, a substantial commitment to a 'Workshop' mode at Fielden Park College.
3. In general, existing open learning systems provide courses designed to meet the requirements of one or more of the external validating or examining bodies. Thus the flexibility which is available to the student in choice of curriculum content is limited. Students can select a course for which they have any necessary entry qualifications and within that course there may be some choice of subject, unit or module. However, within these divisions it is usually difficult to exercise choice of content and learning objectives. There are now beginning to emerge, particularly for school leavers, arrangements through which students are able to exercise a wider degree of choice than has hitherto been the case.
4. There is now an interest in the identification and description of learning situations which provide flexibility for students and of organisational arrangements and administrative procedures which facilitate their extension. The purpose of this paper is to put forward a framework which will help in the exploration and discussion of these developments. It is hoped that the use of learner flexibility profiles will sharpen perceptions and facilitate the rapid spread of more flexible provision in further education.

FLEXIBILITY

5. We take as our starting point FEU's definition of flexible learning, viz "In curricular terms Flexible Learning is defined as THE CREATION OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TAILORED TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE LEARNER." Our primary focus is the individual student and the nature and extent of the various forms of flexibility open to him.
6. Whether we are concerned with the content of learning, methods of assessment, or the pace or any other aspect of learning, it is usually possible to replace the word 'flexibility' with 'Student Choice or Discretion' or 'student autonomy', and this is the central thrust of what we are about. But there is another element which may be in danger of getting lost when we use the words 'choice', 'discretion' and 'autonomy'. That is the process of negotiation through which the range of choices is offered to the student by teachers and counsellors and by means of which he is helped to reach the best decision. While we have no more to say about the processes of negotiation here, we take 'Flexibility' to imply their operation at every level. Wherever there is flexibility there is negotiation.
7. Again, it has to be recognised that the extension of flexible opportunities for the student will have effects at other points on the system. It may well call for the development of new skills on the part of the teacher as well as new support facilities for them and significant changes in administrative practices.

LEARNER FLEXIBILITY PROFILES

8. A Learner Flexibility Profile is a device for analysing and recording the nature and extent of student choice or discretion.
9. Any attempt at producing a profile of the flexibility enjoyed by a student would require the identification of the dimensions along which the flexibility might be examined and would also require a means of locating and recording the extent of that flexibility on a scale of some sort.

DIMENSIONS

10. Among the dimensions of learner flexibility usually of interest are:

The aims and content of learning

Methods of assessment

Modes of attendance

Pace of learning

This list illustrates only a few of the aspects which may be of concern. A dimension is nothing more than an aspect on which it is desired to focus attention and in the method proposed each dimension can be treated separately. Some dimensions are doubtless of more fundamental importance than others but it is hoped to show that the approach can be used to examine any particular field of interest.

11. A little reflection will show that some commonly used dimensions which are subsidiary aspects of other larger scale dimensions, e.g. clearly 'starting dates' and 'finishing dates' are two subsidiary aspects of 'pace of learning'. It is already clear to us that one could devise a structure of dimensions which could be used as a basis for a comprehensive analysis. Time along has prevented us from pursuing that line of thought.

SCALING

12. For summary purposes we need a simple scale as a means of indicating the degree of learner flexibility. Initially it will be found helpful to suggest a general pattern which will apply to several situations or which can readily be adapted.

The general scale suggested is:

Scale Point

1	No discretion
2	Little discretion within specified boundaries
3	Considerable discretion within specified boundaries
4	Open to negotiation outside generally recognised boundaries

Appendix A provides examples of possible scalings against a range of dimensions. Neither the scalings nor the dimensions selected should be regarded as more than illustrative.

CURRICULAR LEVELS

13. Students are conventionally formed into courses - groups of students pursuing clusters of educational aims under a common set of regulations. With scrutiny focussed on the individual student an important point of reference is the course or programme on which he is enrolled. Such are the differences of practice in further and higher education between the treatment of one course and another, even when housed in the same college department, that it is necessary to focus on the course or programme rather than on the college or department at which the student is enrolled.
14. Some curricular issues need to be examined at more than one level. Courses or programmes are organised around groups of educational or vocational aims. Within the broad classifications it is usual to divide and group objectives within divisions which may variously be described by such terms as units, subjects or modules. Further subdivisions are made in conventional situations in which teachers group comparatively limited objectives in lessons or meetings. In order to understand fully the nature and extent of flexibility experienced by students it might be necessary to examine the degree of flexibility experienced in several dimensions at each of the three levels. More frequently we expect that the focus of interest in any individual study of flexibility will be concentrated at a particular curriculum level.

ADMINISTRATIVE LEVELS

15. The extent of flexibility experienced by individual students derives from interactions between students and teachers within constraints deriving from interconnected sets of policies, decisions and precedents involving bodies and organisations which control, on the one hand academic standards, and on the other, resource allocation. In colleges, academic controls are normally applied at such levels as those of course tutor, departmental head and academic board, and in most colleges resource controls are exercised through similar channels. However, outside the college there is normally a clear separation between academic and resource control. Academic controls are in the hands of a number of bodies, which undertake certification through a variety of validating and examining procedures. Usually there is very little direct interaction between validating bodies and those bodies, generally the local education authorities, which control resource allocation: currently, the Manpower Services Commission is an important provider and exercises influence on both aspects.
16. The learner flexibility profiles will be constructed by considering the degree of flexibility available to individual students and the implications for two levels in the college, at the level of teachers and at the level of college management which embraces the various levels of supervision within the college. There will also be consequences of which call for or derive from actions or decisions of external bodies. Implications for the two types of external body may need to be examined separately - see Fig. 1.

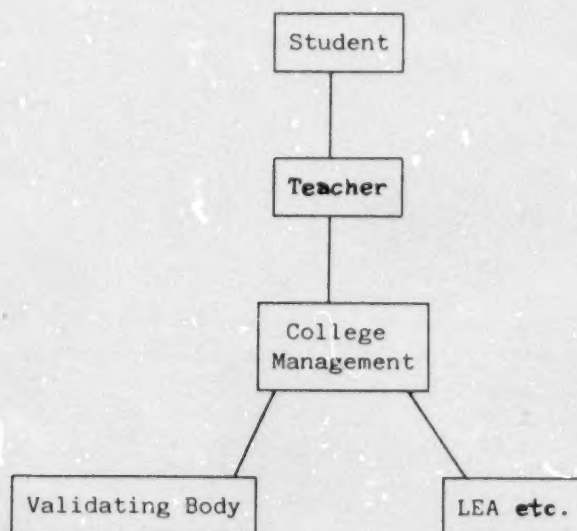


Fig. 1: Administrative Levels

HOW LEARNER FLEXIBILITY PROFILES CAN BE USEFUL

17. By using these profiles anyone involved in any way with teaching or managing education can gain insight into the nature and extent of the discretion or choices available to their students: they may choose some suitable dimensions, set up scales and record fairly precisely the current state of affairs. Any such record forms a valuable basis for discussion with others who are interested in expanding - or for that matter further limiting - student autonomy. Such a study can be initiated **at any** level of the management of the college, LEA or central body. The preparation of flexibility profiles will help to indicate the possibilities of increasing student autonomy and the nature of the changes that have to be brought about in order to increase student discretion in particular respects.
18. At Appendix B we have set out scales for the major dimensions of Curriculum Content, Assessment and Learning Methods together with the general implications for teachers, college managers, LEAs and Central Bodies, of any attempts to increase student flexibility.
19. At Appendix C we have broken the Learning Methods dimension into three components - Lesson Structure, Learning Resources and Tutorial Support - and again examined the implications for each administrative level of any increased discretion for the students. Any study within a college of a particular course or unit would be able to be far more detailed in working out what - if anything - needed to be done at each level in order to bring about the desired changes.
20. Appendix D illustrates a number of examples where central bodies allow flexibility in arrangements but where for various reasons students are not able to take advantage of the full range of opportunities. The ability to locate the level at which the constraints are being applied should be extremely useful in what is at times a tendentious area.

CONCLUSION

21. The concept proposed for the use of flexibility profiles provides a means of exploring ways of increasing the flexible learning opportunities. A later paper will illustrate the application of the concepts to specific cases.

* * * * *

APPENDIX A

TYPICAL SCALED DIMENSIONS

DIMENSIONS	FLEXIBILITY AVAILABLE
Content, Aims & Objective	1. No choice 2. Narrow choice inside specified curriculum 3. Wide choice inside specified curriculum 4. Negotiable outside specified curriculum
Entry Requirements	1. Rigid pattern of formal qualifications 2. Flexible range of formal qualifications 3. Evidence of maturity and appropriate experience 4. None
Learning Methods	1. Formal classes, closely defined practical activities 2. Formal activities supplemented by flexible tutorials and seminars 3. Some formal classes but wide range of informal activities 4. 'Open ended' practical, project and other activity
Learning Resources	1. Only resources are notes taken in class 2. Ample provision of handouts and/or text-book reference and also 3. Learning packages of print material and also 4. Packages supplemented by 'technology'
Access to Tutorial Support	1. Correspondence support only 2. Access in person or by telephone at planned times 3. Planned meetings with flexible access by phone 4. Flexible access in person or by telephone
Practical Activities	1. None 2. Normal laboratory or workshop activities 3. Flexible laboratory or workshop 4. Practical activities out of college

APPENDIX A (Contd).

DIMENSIONS	FLEXIBILITY AVAILABLE
Work Experience	1. None 2. Some within college simulations 3. Plus some short work placements 4. Ample work placements
Group Work	1. None 2. Little group work under close teacher control 3. Frequent loosely structured group work with ready access to teachers 4. Much group work with little teacher intervention
Starting Date	1. Fixed 2. Narrow choices 3. Wide choice 4. Free choice
Finishing Date	1. Fixed 2. Limited choice of assessment date 3. Wide choice of assessment date 4. Free choice
Attendance Pattern	1. Weekly or more frequent meetings 2. Occasional group meetings 3. Individual meetings with tutors 4. None
Assessment Pattern	1. Annual 2. Several times per year 3. On demand 4. None
Assessment Methods	1. Fixed patterns of conventional examinations and tests 2. Limited choice of 'standard' methods 3. Wide choice of standard methods 4. Negotiable 'demonstrations of achievement'

THE MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF LEARNER FLEXIBILITY

DIMENSION		CURRICULUM CONTENT	ASSESSMENT	LEARNING METHODS
Flexibility Available		1. Fixed curriculum and subject 2. Narrow choice of options 3. Wide option choice 4. Content freely negotiable	1. Traditional end of course written examinations 2. In-course assessment 3. Ad hoc testing of individual objectives 4. Self assessment	1. Formal classes 2. Formal classes supplemented by flexible tutorials and seminars 3. Some formal classes but wide range of informal activities 4. 'Open ended' practical, project and other activity
Implications of increasing flexibility for:	Teachers	Readiness to negotiate with colleagues and students within agreed frameworks	Skill in the development and use of appropriate assessment methods	Development of a wide repertoire of learning methods for use as appropriate
	College Managers	I Need to establish procedures for: a. defining extent of flexibility permitted b. formalising arrangements within which negotiations take place c. establishing monitoring procedures II Organise staff development III Encourage informal working between teachers		I Provide appropriate accommodation, materials, equipment and other facilities. Develop appropriate administrative and recording systems II Organise staff development
	Central Bodies	I Need to define nature and extent of permitted flexibility II Monitor performance of various methods adopted		Remove constraints on choice of learning method
	LEAs	Agreement to flexibility within defined areas of college responsibility	Not significant	Readiness to develop resource allocation measures for non-traditional arrangements

APPENDIX B

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A BREAKDOWN OF THE LEARNING METHODS DIMENSION

		DIMENSION		
		LESSON STRUCTURE	LEARNING RESOURCES	TUTORIAL SUPPORT
Flexibility Available		1. Formal lecture classes 2. Some periods of loosely structured activity 3. Mainly loosely structured activity with some formal activities 4. Informal	1. Only resources are notes taken in class 2. Ample provision of hand-outs and/or text-book reference and also 3. Learning packages of print material, and also 4. Packages supplemented by 'technology'	1. No tutorial arrangements 2. Occasional planned tutorials 3. Frequent formal and informal tutorials 4. Tutorial assistance available on demand
Implications of increasing flexibility for:	Teachers	Development of a repertoire of in-class learning methods	I Development of skills in use of new materials, extension of tutorial skills. II Changes in use of teacher's time	
	College Managers	Arrange staff development	I Arrange for evaluation of learning materials II Develop appropriate arrangements for staffing III Develop administrative and recording procedures	
	Central Bodies	Help in development of novel class and tutorial methods Facilitate materials development		
	LEAs	None	May need to adapt resource allocation formulae and fee structures	

APPENDIX C

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APPENDIX D

EXAMPLES OF THE USE OF SCALE POINTS TO LOCATE CONSTRAINTS

EXAMPLE	DIMENSION	LEVEL	STUDENT	TEACHER	MANAGEMENT	CENTRAL BODY
1	PACE	Programme	1	1	1*	4
2	LEARNING METHODS	UNIT A	4	4	4	4
		UNIT B	1	1*	4	4
		UNIT C	2	2*	4	4
3	CURRICULUM CONTENT	Programme	2	2	2*	3
		UNIT A	2	2	2	2
		UNIT B	1	1*	2	2
		UNIT C	2	2	2	2

* Indicates points of constraint

Example 1 : PACE

Here the Central Body imposes no strict timetable and allows assessment to be carried out as required. The college management, however, decides not to take advantage of the flexibility available and works strictly to the pattern of the college year. Under these conditions there is no choice available to teachers or students.

Example 2 : LEARNING METHODS

Here the Central Body allows total flexibility in choice of learning method and the college management has made appropriate support facilities available. Only one of the three teachers (Unit A) is making full use of the full variety of learning methods. Unit B is being taught conventionally while the teacher of Unit C is less conventional but still some way from taking full advantage of the freedom offered.

Example 3 : CURRICULUM CONTENT

This example illustrates the case where the Central Body allows for significant choice at programme level through the variety of options which are available. The college, however, may have been unable to recruit sufficient students to justify a full range of options. Within each of the constituent units the Central Body offers only a limited choice of objectives and although the student has choice within Units A and C the teacher of Unit B has not found it possible to make the full choice available.